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Albania

BUREAU OF DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND LABOR

International Religious Freedom Report 2010

November 17, 2010

The constitution provides for freedom of religion, and other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion.

The government generally respected religious freedom in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the government during the reporting period.

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom with the government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 11,100 square miles and a population of 3.6 million. No reliable data were available on religious participation or membership; the last official census including such data was conducted in 1939. The majority of citizens do not actively practice a faith; however, the four traditional religious groups are Muslim (Sunni), Bektashi (a form of Shi'a Sufism), Orthodox Christian (the Autocephalous Orthodox Church of Albania), and Roman Catholic. In addition, there are numerous Protestant denominations and other religious groups, including the Baha'i Faith, Jehovah's Witnesses, and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons).

The State Committee on Cults reported more than 230 religious groups, organizations, foundations, and educational institutions operating in the country.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution provides for freedom of religion, and other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion. Citizens have the right to sue the government for violations of religious freedom.

By law the country is secular. According to the constitution, there is no official religion and all religions are equal; however, the predominant religious communities (Sunni Muslim, Bektashi, Orthodox, and Catholic) enjoy a greater degree of official recognition (e.g., national holidays) and social status based on their historical presence in the country.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Easter (Catholic and Orthodox), Christmas, Major Bajram, Minor Bajram, and Nevruz.

The government does not require registration or licensing of religious groups; however, the State Committee on Cults maintains records and statistics on foreign religious organizations that contact it for assistance. Religious movements may acquire the official status of a juridical person by registering with the Tirana District Court under the Law on Nonprofit Organizations, which recognizes the status of a nonprofit association regardless of whether the organization has a cultural, recreational, religious, or humanitarian character. Registration grants religious groups the right to hold bank accounts and own property, as well as some level of tax-exempt status. The four traditional religious communities signed agreements with the government in October 2008 that granted them wider tax exemptions and other privileges.

The State Committee on Cults, under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Tourism, Culture, Youth, and Sports, is charged with regulating relations between the government and religious communities, as well as protecting freedom of religion and promoting interreligious cooperation and understanding. The committee states that its records on religious organizations facilitate the granting of residence permits by police to foreign employees of various religious organizations. No organization reported any difficulty obtaining residency permits during the reporting period. Foreign missionaries were generally issued one-year residency permits initially, according to a new law governing the residency of all foreign citizens that passed in 2009. According to this law, foreign citizens receive one-year permits upon the first application, followed by two two-year permits. After this, permanent residency permits can be issued.

Article 10 of the constitution calls for separate bilateral agreements to regulate relations between the government and religious communities. The Catholic Church has had such an agreement with the government since 2002. In October 2008 the government signed agreements with the Muslim, Orthodox, and Bektashi communities. VUSH, a Protestant umbrella organization, asked to conclude a bilateral agreement; the request remained pending at the end of the reporting period. Among the advantages of having the agreement are an official recognition of the community, prioritized property restitution, and tax exemptions. Government financial support and state-subsidized clergy salaries were to be implemented based on a law on the financing of religious communities passed in June 2009. However, in practice there was little progress on restitution of religious properties.

According to the Ministry of Education, public schools are secular and the law prohibits ideological and religious indoctrination. Religion is not taught in public schools. According to official figures, religious communities, organizations, and foundations had 103 affiliated associations and foundations managing 101 educational institutions, of which 15 were officially religious-affiliated schools. By law the Ministry of Education must license these schools, and curriculums must comply with national education standards. The Catholic and Muslim groups operated numerous state-licensed schools and reported no problems obtaining licenses for new schools. The Orthodox Church and the Bektashis operated strictly religious educational centers for the training of clerics.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The government generally respected religious freedom in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the government during the reporting period.

There is no law prohibiting the wearing of religious clothing or symbols. School principals have the right to set standards for "appropriate clothing," which at times included restrictions on public displays of religious symbols. During the reporting

period, there were reports school officials prevented female public high school students wearing Islamic headscarves from attending classes.

The government continued to address claims from each of the four traditional religious groups regarding the return or restitution of property seized during the former communist era; however, many of the property claims remained unresolved. With the 2008 bilateral agreements, the State Agency for the Restitution and Compensation of Property was instructed to give priority to properties owned by religious communities, although progress was slow.

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The Orthodox Church continued construction of a new cathedral in Tirana, to be one of the largest in the Balkans, on land it received as compensation for land seized by the communist government, but it cited lack of action on other property claims throughout the country. It also had requests pending for new churches in Gjirokaster and Vlore.

Both the Orthodox Church and the Catholic Church included in their restitution claims religious icons and precious manuscripts seized by the communist government that remained in the national archives.

The Albanian Islamic Community continued to request building permits for a new mosque on land that was returned to the community through the post-communist restitution process. At the end of the reporting period, Tirana municipal officials had not acted on the request.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees in the country.

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice, nor were any substantial acts of vandalism reported.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom with the government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

The ambassador and other embassy officials frequently engaged religious leaders in meetings, discussions, and events such as iftars (evening meals during Ramadan) and roundtables. Embassy officials were active in promoting religious tolerance, engaging young persons, women, and other community members in joint activities such as seminars and community gatherings. The ambassador and other embassy officials also engaged the government and advocated publicly on behalf of an equitable agreement for the VUSH and an up-to-date law on religion. During the reporting period, the embassy extended these efforts to three public high schools that work with madrassahs on community-based initiatives.

The embassy supported the publication of a book, Pathways to Inter-Religious Dialogue in Albania, at the conclusion of a project promoting this theme. In addition, the embassy hosted a digital video conference between local religious and community leaders and a director of a U.S. religious community center involved in promoting community cooperation and interfaith dialogue.

Embassy officials continued to urge the government to address religious property claims and return buildings, land, and other property to religious groups that lost them under communist rule.

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